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SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CHALLENGERS ON RELATIONS WITH U.S.,
THE FTA, AND EXTRADITION

¶1. (U) Summary: Presidential challengers Gaviria, Serpa, Mockus, and Leyva held a televised (one channel) debate on April 6. All save Mockus lamented an asymmetrical U.S.-Colombia relationship and criticized the FTA. The responses on our extradition relationship were more complex. All supported extradition of drug traffickers but proposed caveats for members of illegal armed groups. President Uribe did not participate. While the National Electoral Council has authorized TV airtime for up to three national debates, it remains to be seen whether any will take place prior to the May 28 election. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Caracol TV sponsored a Presidential challengers "debate" on April 6. Formal nominees Horacio Serpa (Liberal), Carlos Gaviria (Polo), Antanas Mockus (Visionaries), and Alvaro Leyva (Nacional Movement) participated; President Uribe declined to do so. Questions addressed the following themes: relations with the U.S., FTA, extradition, humanitarian exchange, abortion, homosexual marriage, and poverty. Each participant had one minute to answer each question. They were not permitted to engage each other in debate.

¶3. (U) On relations with the U.S., Serpa and Gaviria offered strongly negative responses, lamenting asymmetry and surrender of sovereignty on the part of Colombia. Serpa went so far as to call the U.S. a "monster" in the hemisphere. Gaviria criticized the Uribe Administration for distancing Colombia from its Latin American neighbors as a result of excessively close ties to the U.S. In separate public remarks Gaviria called Colombia a "subject" of the U.S.

¶4. (U) While former Bogota mayor Mockus described the FTA as an opportunity for Colombia, the others strongly criticized the measure. Gaviria proposed a public referendum on the FTA prior to Congressional consideration. Serpa stated the FTA was negotiated poorly by the GOC and Leyva worried about potential loss of jobs in the agricultural sector.

¶5. (U) All four challengers expressed strong support for extraditing hard-core drug traffickers to the U.S. Nevertheless, Gaviria and Serpa proposed that individuals involved in a peace process with the GOC not be extradited. Gaviria, a former head of the Constitutional Court, argued for first trying locally individuals accused of crimes on Colombian soil or against Colombian nationals. Leyva attempted to shift the focus of the discussion to drug consumption in the U.S.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: We understand the viewer base for the event was small, and national print coverage was limited. Given his commanding lead in all polls, Uribe sat this one out with no noticeable public outcry. While the National Electoral Council has authorized airtime for three nationally televised debates (as opposed to the April 6 event, which was carried on only one TV channel), time is running out, and we have heard of no formal planning for such encounters. While the Government plans to submit the FTA for congressional consideration after the new Congress takes office on July 20, debates to date have sharply criticized the lack of a published text.

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